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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/14/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PM](#) [LE](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI BUTTER FOR LEBANESE GUNS

Classified By: NEA PDAS Jeffrey Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This is an action request. Please see paragraph three.

SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) The Department seeks Saudi assistance to deliver advanced capabilities to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in advance of Lebanon's 2009 legislative elections. The LAF has requested Cessna Caravan gunships for close air support as well as a third-party transfer of Jordanian M-60 tanks, which will require refurbishment and possibly upgrade. These systems will help the LAF counter threats to Lebanon's internal security, demonstrate political support for the LAF and the Lebanese government, bolster the electoral prospects of March 14 and like-minded independents seeking a government monopoly on the use of force in Lebanon, and bolster public confidence in the LAF as an alternative to Hizballah.

OBJECTIVES

[1](#)3. (C/REL SAUDI ARABIA) Embassy Riyadh is requested to approach senior Saudi interlocutors in pursuing the following objectives:

-- Request a \$60M grant to the LAF earmarked for the purchase of Cessna Caravan gunships requested by the LAF for close air support, counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and surveillance missions. We expect to deliver at least one aircraft before Lebanon's 2009 elections.

-- Request a \$60M grant to the LAF earmarked for the refurbishment and possible upgrade of 66 Jordanian M-60 tanks requested by the LAF for third-party transfer from Jordan, complete with appropriate ammunition. (Note: Jordan has offered M-60A1 tanks, but Lebanon may request M-60A3 tanks or an upgrade of the M-60A1 tanks to M-60A3 standards.) We expect to deliver a company of tanks (approximately 11-14) before Lebanon's 2009 elections.

-- Note that the provision of these systems to the LAF is subject to further procedural hurdles, including Exceptions to National Disclosure Policy (ENDPs), formal authorization to sell/transfer the systems, and Congressional notification.

Given the intent to provide some assistance prior to Lebanon's elections and the need to identify funding immediately, we chose to approach Saudi Arabia as soon as we and the LAF had identified a package of items that would address the LAF's military needs and the U.S.-Saudi desire to provide high-visibility assistance.

REPORTING DEADLINE

[1](#)4. (U) Post is requested to report the results of this demarche by cable to NEA/ELA Lebanon Desk Officer Matthew Irwin and PM/RSAT Lebanon Desk Officer David Burke by

Thursday, November 20.

BACKGROUND

15. (SBU) Saudi Arabia has been a strong political and financial backer of the LAF since mid-2007 when it quietly provided \$100M to support LAF operations against Fatah al-Islam militants in Lebanon's Nahr al-Barid refugee camp. This assistance came in addition to a \$1B deposit in the Central Bank of Lebanon after the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war and millions of dollars of humanitarian, reconstruction, and development assistance since 2006.

16. (C) Saudi Arabia has also pressed the United States to provide advanced capabilities to the LAF to ensure it is prepared to respond to emerging crisis and, more strategically, as a political and military counterweight to Syrian and Iranian support for Hizballah. Various Saudi officials including Prince Bandar as-Sultan and King Abdullah himself have previously indicated to U.S. and Lebanese officials, including Defense Minister Elias Murr and parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri, that they would be willing to help the LAF procure more advanced capabilities if and when they were offered by the United States.

17. (S) After assessing the LAF's military needs, the availability of U.S. equipment, and regional policy concern including Israel's qualitative military edge (QME), the Departments of State and Defense are moving to provide three Cessna Caravan gunships and a third-party transfer of 66 Jordanian M-60 tanks pending consultations with Congress and our regional allies. These items would represent a qualitatively different level of assistance than has been provided to the LAF since the mid-1980s. None of these systems is assessed as a threat to Israel's QME.

POINT OF CONTACT

18. (U) Please contact NEA/ELA Lebanon Desk Officer Matthew Irwin or PM/RSAT Lebanon Desk Officer David Burke with questions or for further background information.
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